

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

Card-carrying Catholics

Are you a card-carrying Catholic? It seems a lot of us are.

The Catholic News Service reported recently that an old Catholic custom has gotten a new lease on life. The business of holy cards is booming.

People are selling them on eBay, trading them on Web sites, and even collecting them in—for want of a better term—mass quantities. A Staten Island priest said he has about 40,000 holy cards. An Ohio collector has more than 20,000—one of them, he says, dates from the 17th century.

We shouldn't be surprised. Holy cards are among the cheapest and most familiar of sacramentals—those devotional items that assist us in our prayer lives. (The palms you collected on Palm Sunday—and that are now collecting dust on top of your refrigerator—fall into the same category.)

We find holy cards everywhere: They're given out at funerals and baptisms, sold in gift shops, enclosed with birthday and sympathy cards. They find their way into wallets and purses, breviaries and Bibles. They are wedged into mirrors, tacked to bulletin boards, pinned with magnets to refrigerators.

Some of mine are yellowing in the bottom of my desk drawer, where I put them and forget them.

Others are vivid reminders of mileposts in living, and dying. I still have cards from the funerals of my parents and family friends, and take them out from time to time to look at them, read them, reflect on them. There's something poignant and potent about them. Here, in slivers of laminated paper, are the final punctuation marks of life.

There are other reasons for collecting these remembrances. For some of us, these holy cards, adorned with saints or icons, become portable chapels—pocket-sized shrines. Place one on your desk and you have an altar. Tack one to your refrigerator and you have a memorial.

Your wallet can be a repository of receipts—and of reverence. Where else can St. Jude share space with a Metro Card?

We can't all collect priceless art. But for a dollar, you can get a picture that you can carry in your pocket, to take out and study while you whisper a prayer or two, anywhere, any time.

And as the Church adds to her communion of saints, the faithful adds to its collection of cards. St. Padre Pio, St. Katherine Drexel, and Mother Theresa are now sold in stores beside St. Francis, St. Anthony and St. Joseph. (When you think of the roster of saints we have, it's quite a gathering of All Stars. Imagine if kids traded saint cards the way they trade baseball cards. Hey, I'll give you my Max Kolbe for your Frank de Sales!)

In the end, maybe that's the most important thing about these sacramentals: They remind us of all those who came before us. Need any proof that the Catholic Church has given the world some of the most dynamic, creative and enterprising characters in history?

You don't have to look far.

It's in the cards.

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